

VETERANS AFFAIRS—REASON FOR FAILURE TO INCREASE
BASIC DISABILITY PENSION—POSSIBLE REFERENCE TO
COMMITTEE

Mr. Jack Marshall (Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe): Mr. Speaker, I am sure that you and those members who are here are aware that the topic on which I will speak now is one that I brought up on many occasions before, as did my colleague, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles). I advise the parliamentary secretary to give the following message to the minister, that the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre and I will continue to bring up this topic until we can impress on the government the necessity of changing the basic rate of pensions in the formula which was established in 1973 in line with the different categories in the public service.

I brought up this question on a number of occasions and I do not want to repeat the arguments that the minister gave to support the fact that the government was not going to increase the basic rate of the pension and that the veterans would accept this as good Canadians. On the last occasion the minister told me that the government will wait until there is an improvement in the financial situation, at which time it will look at the matter again.

What I wish to ask the minister through his parliamentary secretary is how long the veterans will have to wait to get equity. How long will it take the government to fulfil its commitment toward the veterans? I can remind him that it is 60-odd years since World War I and 30-odd years since World War II, but those who suffered incarceration in prisoner of war camps were granted the basic rate of pension only in 1973. How long will we have to wait before the government is in a financial position to grant the veterans' request? I say to the minister that he cannot equate, balance or reconcile the suffering of veterans with the financial capabilities of the government. How long will these people have to wait?

I ask the parliamentary secretary to compare the figures in the annual report of the veterans of Canada for 1975-76 with the recently tabled report which we received a couple of days ago. According to the first report, there were 12,404 World War I veterans receiving disability pensions in 1976. According to the new report there are only 10,889 veterans receiving disability pensions this year. There is a difference of 1,515 veterans who did not receive the increases, and now they are gone.

Also, I would like to mention those who receive 48 per cent pensions. In 1976 there were 8,947; this year it is down to 7,885, a difference of 1,062. How long will their widows have to wait before the government is in a financial position to fulfil the commitment it made to the veterans many years ago? Now even Second World War veterans are dying out at the rate of 50 a year. How long will their widows have to wait to receive the equity they were promised?

The minister indicated with respect to the mail we have all received concerning the feelings of veterans across Canada that he realizes what is going on across the country, and that he is aware of the views of veterans and veterans' organiza-

Adjournment Debate

tions on this subject. He realizes what is going on across the country, the consideration and the wonderment of veterans and veterans' associations, and how they feel about the answers we are getting from the government.

● (1812)

I was looking through some of the speeches of the Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald), and in a speech given on July 16, 1977, he said to the Hong Kong Veterans Association of Canada—and I will read just one brief sentence.

Ralph Waldo Emerson . . . A great poet and essayist . . . once described a hero as a person who was brave five minutes longer than an ordinary man.

He was brave five minutes longer, but he has been waiting many years to get the quality he deserves.

I know that the parliamentary secretary is going to give us a list of the pensions in existence now, and they are generous. They have been generous, but they have not been generous while these First World War veterans suffered over the 60-odd years and did not come up to equity until quite recently.

The National Veterans' Organization of Canada have submitted a brief and the minister has received it today. They are recommending that the minister introduce an amendment to have the effect, not only of raising more disability pensions to a level which is reasonable and consistent with the wishes of the Canadian public to ensure fair and reasonable compensation, but to avoid any repetition of the serious deficiency in the present rate; and to avoid having to update the basic rate from time to time. This would avoid the necessity of veterans' associations having to plead with the government for essential increases in pensions every few years, a responsibility which they are pleased to carry out on behalf of veterans, but one which is distasteful, and one which carries with it the implication that sacrifices of disabled veterans, by reason of war service, have been forgotten and neglected.

I know that the parliamentary secretary is very reasonable and compassionate. I hope that he will help myself and the member from Winnipeg North Centre to try to convince the minister that this amendment is due right now, not later when the government is in a better financial position, because, to take the example of the waste that is going on in Canada, that should not be taken out on the backs of the veterans.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gilbert Parent (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Veterans Affairs): I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe (Mr. Marshall) for bringing up this topic once again in the House.

This question has been brought up repeatedly in the House, and it is not because of lack of interest that we have not proceeded with the legislation. The Minister of Veterans Affairs (Mr. MacDonald) has stated that disability pensions will increase 7.2 per cent as of January 1, 1978. I know the hon. member for Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe and also the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) are